

Social Work & Aging

General Background

The aging of the U.S. population presents social, economic, and political implications for both the social work profession and the nation. Social workers, other professionals, and the public increasingly understand that old age is a time of continued growth and that older adults contribute significantly to their families, communities, and society. At the same time, Americans face multiple biopsychosocial challenges as they age: changes in health and physical abilities; difficulty in accessing comprehensive, affordable, and high-quality health and behavioral health care; decreased economic security; increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation; and loss of meaningful social roles and opportunities to remain engaged in society. Social workers, who work across the health and behavioral health care continuum and in diverse settings such as adult protective service agencies, employee assistance programs, veterans' service programs, and senior centers, are well positioned and trained to support and advocate for older adults and their caregivers.¹

With the anticipated expansion in the demand for services for older adults, the social work profession is working to support social workers currently practicing in aging while also recruiting more practitioners to this specialty area.² In its 2008 report on the future of the professional health care workforce for older adults, the Institute of Medicine affirmed both the increasing need for gerontological social work and the profession's multiple initiatives to enhance gerontological social work education, training, and research.³

Recommendations

- Increase opportunities to develop and promote gerontological social work content and training in all levels of social work education.
- Advance policies, programs, and professional behavior that promote older adults' self-advocacy, lifelong learning, civic engagement, and equal opportunity in employment.
- Expand policies and programs that address the transportation, housing, and service access needs of older people in urban, suburban, rural and frontier areas.
- Promote wellness, prevention, early intervention, and outreach services in health, behavioral health, and social service programs for all older adults and their caregivers.
- Preserve the integrity of Social Security and expanding public, private, and commercial systems of economic security for older adults.
- Strengthen of government oversight, requirements, and funding to prevent and address elder mistreatment in home, community-based, and nursing home settings.

- Develop a comprehensive and affordable system of long-term services and supports that enables older adults to maintain maximal independence in the setting of their choice.
- Expand recognition of, and reimbursement for, the social work role in meeting the biopsychosocial needs of older people and their caregivers, including care coordination and advance care planning.

References

- ¹ National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Aging and Wellness. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statements, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 14-21). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- ² Whitaker, T., Weismiller, T., & Clark, E. (2006). *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce: A national study of licensed social workers. Executive summary*. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers.
- ³ Institute of Medicine (IOM). (2008). *Retooling for an aging America: Building the health care workforce*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Additional Resources

- Cohen, H.L., Galambos, C.M., Greene, R.R., & Kropf, N.P. (2007). *Foundations of social work practice in the field of aging: A competency based approach*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
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- National Association of Social Workers. (2003). *NASW Standards for Social Work Services in Long Term Care Settings*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- National Association of Social Workers Policy Statement: Aging and Wellness